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ABSTRACT

Research suggests a strong association between the existence of professional learning communities within schools, increases in the effectiveness of practice, and improvement in student achievement. This paper describes the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), a professional development program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. It is based on three assumptions: the new paradigm of professional development provides the best way for school people to make changes required by the new expectations for teaching; professional learning communities can be deliberately created and sustained by people inside the schools; and training and support can reduce the fragility of collegial structures. All schools within a Coalition of Essential Schools were invited to join, and 75 schools with 90 Critical Friends Group (CFG) coaches were accepted. Participants committed themselves to working in small CFGs of faculty and administrators toward self-defined goals for improved student learning. The Annenberg Institute committed itself to training and supporting coaches. Despite variability among CFGs, there were common developmental stages, including considering the CFG an oasis where educators could collaborate with colleagues; using member time to strengthen approaches to teaching and strengthen understanding of how students learn; and addressing fundamental questions about teaching. Factors that were influential in helping or inhibiting CFGs from moving to more complex levels included internal group dynamics, administrative structure, school culture, and access to resources. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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"That Group Really Makes Me Think!"
Critical Friends Groups and the Development of Reflective Practitioners

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The Theory

Schools are being pushed to make dramatic changes in instructional practice. First, they are supposed to engage students deeply in learning that taps higher-order thinking skills and produces conceptual understanding (Cohen et al., 1993; Newmann et al, 1996). Second, they are expected to adapt approaches to teaching and learning that will work for students whose needs and motivational patterns genuinely differ from those of students a generation ago (Evans, 1998; McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993). These two imperatives create an extraordinary challenge for school people. If they are to implement Newmann's model of "authentic instruction" or the precepts of constructivist learning or any other model rooted in conceptual learning, most high school teachers must abandon the textbook-based lecture/discussion/tightly-controlled laboratory model that was the basis of their education and at the core of their training. In its stead, they must embrace unfamiliar and ambiguous educational strategies and tailor them to students who come to school with a broad and unpredictable array of assumptions about school and society. Exacerbating these problems is the fact that most teachers are either brand-new and trying to figure out the system or in mid/late-career and as set in their ways as most people at that stage. Evans (1998, p. 7) defines stress as "the reaction within an organism when demands made upon it tax its ability to cope." Teachers facing today's demands, armed only with today's skills and attitudes, are placed in a predicament that embodies stress. Evans argues that there are two possible ways to address this overwhelming situation: reduce the demands or increase coping abilities. Since the intellectual and interpersonal demands on school people are not likely to be reduced in the foreseeable future, the emphasis must be on enhancing coping skills.

Many leading thinkers about American education have concluded that the conventional approach to professional development will not produce in practitioners the coping behaviors necessary to work in a new, demanding fashion, alien to their experience. Traditional professional development, characterized by short-term, de-contextualized, direct instruction, has been shown over and over again to be inadequate to the task of helping practitioners make deep and lasting changes in their practice (Little, 1993; Lord, 1994; Lieberman, 1995). Over the last few years, a consensus appears to have emerged, at least in the scholarly community, that a "new paradigm" must be developed that focuses on practitioner-driven, "job-embedded," collegial, highly reflective learning (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Both Newmann (1996) and McLaughlin & Talbert (1997) found a strong association between the existence of such professional learning communities

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within schools, increases in the effectiveness of practice, and improvement in student achievement, even as measured by standardized test scores.

The Program

The National School Reform Faculty program (NSRF), a professional development program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR), is based on three assumptions.[1] First, the designers decided that the "new paradigm" of professional development provides the best—and perhaps the only—way for school people to make the changes and adaptations required by the new expectations for schooling. Second, they believed that professional learning communities could be deliberately created and sustained by people inside schools. Finally, they assumed that training and support would reduce the fragility of collegial structures that Little (1990a) describes.

The program began in 1995, the brainchild of a group of practitioners who had worked for several years with Institute staff. Following the recommendations of this group, the NSRF co-directors invited all schools in the Coalition of Essential Schools (the national reform organization with which AISR had the most experience) to join in this experimental program. Seventy-five schools with ninety CFG coaches were accepted into the program; all had staff who were willing to sign on for its two year span. These people made a commitment to work in small Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) of faculty and administrators in their schools toward self-defined goals for improved student learning. They agreed to set up at least one two-hour meeting each month, during which they would establish and publicly state their student goals, help each other think about teaching practices that would move them closer to achieving them, examine curriculum and student work, and identify school culture issues that could affect student achievement. Group members also declared themselves willing to form peer observation partnerships, so they could observe each other at least monthly and offer each other feedback on that work.

The Annenberg Institute committed itself to the training and support of coaches for the Critical Friends Groups. These coaches, chosen by school staff, were drawn from within

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[1] Data for this paper are drawn from two sources: the experience of the first author, who is one of the program designers, and more than 300 classroom observations and interviews, conducted primarily by the second author, at fourteen schools during 3–5 day yearly site visits. Each school was visited three times, once early in the process, once near the end of the two-year program, and finally a year after the end of formal support by the Annenberg Institute . During each visit, there were interviews with the school principal, the CFG coaches, and a sampling of practitioners—some members of CFGs, some not. Classroom observations served as a basis for teacher interviews, offering one way to track reflective discourse about concrete practice. On several occasions, field researchers were able to observe CFG meetings.

the school or from the ranks of trusted outsiders. The pattern of NSRF work with the three cohorts of coaches has remained quite consistent over the life of the program, although the content has been revised each year. Initial intensive work is followed by a period of school practice, with some support from other coaches and the NSRF staff (largely by e-mail and telephone), followed by a return to intensive training. The first cohort convened for a six-day summer seminar in 1995, where they learned and shared knowledge about adult learning, group dynamics, and professional collegiality in addition to more nuts-and-bolts work on protocols for looking at student work, peer observation models, and team-building exercises. CFG work began early in the school year. The whole group of ninety coaches came back together for a two-day meeting in January, where they shared disasters and triumphs, honed skills and learned new ones. A substantial block of time was devoted to a discussion of standards—What are they? Who should determine them (local CFGs or NSRF)? How do you work with them?—which had emerged as an unexpectedly knotty problem within the CFGs. During the spring, AISR sponsored regional meetings intended to begin building networks among coaches and CFGs that were within reasonable distance from one another. NSRF staff also put together a Coaches Listserv, intended to facilitate conversation among coaches.

In the summer of 1996, AISR sponsored three seminars for experienced coaches as well as New Coaches Seminars for the second cohort of coaches. These sessions focused on analysis of school culture, a need which emerged from coaches' realization that organizational norms and patterns could enhance or destroy efforts to improve teaching and student learning. This came as a surprise to a number of teacher-coaches who were steeped in the belief that classroom practice could be isolated from the organization's culture. In addition, in various places, coaches got together and planned AISR-funded local institutes on topics of concern to CFGs.

This program description makes NSRF sound less variable than it really is, for two reasons. The first is the broad range of skills and experiences among coaches. Some people came to the initial seminar from collaborative cultures, armed with highly developed facilitation skills and enormous experience in working with adult learners; others came with only a tenuous conception of what collegiality might look like. Some coaches have since taken advantage of every opportunity for training and support offered by AISR; others have fulfilled only their barest commitments to attend national and regional coaches meetings. As Cohorts II, III, and IV entered the training process, the NSRF staff began to draw on experienced coaches to act as New Coaches Seminar facilitators—these people were instrumental in revising the program in ways they believed would better serve those doing the coaching work in the field. That means that, among the 1995 coaches, there are people who could take over any NSRF leadership position without missing a beat, while others are still struggling to define their roles (or have given up that struggle). However intensive the six-day seminar, it is still only six days, insufficient time to overcome initial differences in skills and motivation.

The second reason for NSRF variability is the decentralization of the program. Because a primary goal was to root the initiative in the needs and interests of each CFG rather

than in a specific model (such as Success for All or Turning Points), the work was quickly modified by the culture of the particular school and by the personalities of coach and CFG members. While most coaches began their work by using a common set of concepts, materials, and approaches, by the third year, the nature of the work varied widely. In one school, the CFG ended its formal work after two years, celebrating their (undocumented) achievements with a champagne party and moving on to the next initiative. In another, CFGs have been incorporated into the normal structure of the school; every staff member participates in one during the monthly "late-start" morning devoted to this work. In yet another school, the CFG has disbanded, but at least one of the school's component "houses" has created a collaborative culture of its own that uses the processes and protocols pioneered by the original CFG. Many coaches believe that this kind of mutation is salutary; as one said, "I don't even think I would see it as negative if three, four, five years from now you don't have something that's called CFG here. I think there will be something significantly different if the leadership cares that people talk to each other with some intentional rules of the game."

Stages of Development

Despite the variability among CFGs, certain common developmental stages appear to characterize CFG growth over time. In the first stage, staff members describe the CFG as an oasis, a trusting setting where they can spend uninterrupted time with colleagues—something which rarely occurs in schools. Describing the first year meetings, one coach reported:

> Our check-ins at the beginning of each meeting...became powerful experiences, the telling of stories. Two members shared the strain of having toddlers at home and the teaching-parenting conflict they felt with their hundred or more students at school. Our health teacher, who had bravely thrown herself into a new, complicated schedule with three sophomore teams, brought her frustration and problems to the group... More personal problems which impacted teaching effectiveness were shared with increasing remarkable ease. Members of the group told me frequently that they looked forward to visitations and meetings, when they knew they had a place like no other in their professional life to pause, question, think, and share. (Appleby, 1998)

These CFGs are also described as support groups, in which teachers can discuss student problems or more general external factors (ineffective leadership, bureaucracy, etc.), that inhibit good teaching.

A second level of work begins when practitioners start to use their time, as one CFG member put it, "to strengthen approaches to teaching, [and to] strengthen understanding of how students learn." CFGs at this stage spend the majority of their meetings talking about what they do in the classroom and how to improve lessons. As they do so, they begin to question old habits of instruction. One teacher reported that

her CFG asked her what was going through her mind as she planned a particular lesson. "Same thing that's always in my head," she recalled saying, "How do we have fun with this? But then, I thought, maybe that's not the best way to teach... That group really pulls me up short and makes me think." A member of another CFG said her colleagues made her focus on a specific part of her practice: "I had always thought I was giving choices to students, but there wasn't really a second choice. I realized I needed to give more real choices and more real responsibility."

CFGs in the third stage address fundamental questions about teaching. They talk about educational purpose and about how school activities are embedded in larger contexts—including units of study, student needs, and the school's mission. One CFG has been working on the connections between the mission statement, the specific standards participants have developed, and student products. Right now, they are looking at indicators that differentiate cooperative from collaborative work. To help make this distinction, a teacher brought two examples of student work and a transcript, written by her observer, of the students' interactions as they did the assignment. From this conversation, the CFG decided that collaborative work has no pre-set goal, encouraging students to generate new knowledge, while cooperative groups work toward teacher-determined answers, but help students learn the skills required for collaboration. CFG members are now checking out this distinction as they design curriculum, examine student work, and observe each other, and have added a question that emerged from the transcripts—what is the impact of gender on students ability to learn together? This sort of organic development of reflection seems to characterize stage three CFGs.

Stage three CFGs also spend significant time connecting specific practices to larger issues of school culture and the community. One coach recently wrote to the Listserv:

> I've been toying with the idea of a parent discussion group for some time...(separate from the PTO genre and from parent leadership groups). If open conversation about difficult issues works so well for our CFG and my Student Collaborative Inquiry Group, why not with parents? (I wonder if I can include grandparents next...those are the additional bond issue votes that we need.) I knew that it had to be 'something different' to avoid their own war stories and complaints that would lead to discontent. So, the text-based discussion protocol seemed a reasonable place to start.

Just as participants begin to see creating standards and peer observation as a whole, not two different "things we do," mature CFGs begin to blur the lines between the different parts of the school and between the school and the community it serves.

This is a rough cut at definition of stages; fuller definition will emerge from a closer look at the entire data set. We do know that, even as defined here, these stages are far from stable. Changes in the nature of the team, in school culture, and in organizational structure can push a CFG from consideration of serious practice issues back into a story-telling, support group mode. This recursive pattern does not seem to be either good or bad; the most mature groups move back and forth among stages, using whatever

method best meets their needs. It is, however, interesting that these three stages, identified independently of Judith Warren Little's thinking, so closely parallel her definition of four kinds of collaboration—Storytelling and Scanning for Ideas, Aid and Assistance, Sharing, and Joint Work (Little, 1990b). It would appear that teachers in the most mature CFGs develop the kind of functional interdependence that Little associates with "joint work," even if that level of interdependence was not part of their work mandate.

Problems and Pressures

Several factors appear to be particularly strong in helping or inhibiting CFGs from moving to more complex levels of work. They include:

• **Internal group dynamics**: In groups that begin with substantial pre-existing levels of trust, progress is made quickly; until high trust levels are established, it is impossible for groups to move to more complex levels of interaction. In schools where staff had already done substantive work together (to create a school from scratch, to design a new building that would meet emerging educational needs), CFG members could draw on pre-existing habits of collegiality. In schools where isolation was the norm, the habits of autonomy and privacy had to be deliberately addressed and overcome.

In the context of the first cohort schools, it was important to differentiate trust—a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to colleagues—from congeniality. The first is genuinely the basis for posing challenging questions; the latter can actually stand in the way of "straight talk." In one school, a staff member said that their fundamental principle was "tone of decency," translated as "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." The CFG followed this edict and, predictably, had great difficulty getting past the team-building/support group stage. While they did peer observation and used protocols to examine student work, the emphasis was so much on "warm" feedback that participants were never pushed very hard or very far.

• **Administrative structure**: The precise nature of administrative support makes an astonishing difference in the productivity of CFGs. All building leaders are required by NSRF to write a letter pledging support to the program; the difference in their interpretation of "support" makes a significant difference to the outcome. Principals play a wide array of roles in NSRF work, and, even when the role appears to be similar, it can differ depending on the individual's leadership model. In one school, where the administration has deliberately pursued a very collaborative governance model, the three leaders are all members of CFGs (two as coaches, one as a participant). At another school, where the principal embraces a more hierarchical model, CFG members became very anxious and withdrew from their fledgling collaborations when she joined the group in its second year. In general, it is clear that the principal must actively support the CFG by encouraging meetings, willingly hiring substitutes so that peer observation and debriefing can take place, and providing other non-standard opportunities, such as CFG retreat days. In schools where the principal takes an amiable but passive role,

CFGs do not seem to thrive any more than they do when the principal orders all staff to take part in CFGs. In one school, principal-mandated participation in the CFG during the second year was perceived as punitive by those teachers who did not choose to buy in. Their forced entry into the process effectively ended the group's development.

Even when the administrator understands the objectives and processes of NSRF and sets up the right structure for the school, that will not protect the work when that person leaves. It is astonishing to see how vulnerable this work is to administrative changes. In her discussion of the fragility of collegial relations, Little says that a "shift in building leadership can alter the governing values and priorities, the opportunities created in a master schedule, and the incentives and rewards associated with collaborative work. Relationships, habits and structures that have taken years to build may unravel in a matter of weeks" (Little, 1990b, p. 181). We found this to be true. Even in schools where collaborative culture seemed deeply rooted after two years, a new principal could dismantle the whole enterprise. Moreover, it seemed that, in a number of places, new administrators felt compelled to do so, as part of establishing a "new order." This was true in suburban as well as urban schools, but it seemed most stark in the large city districts, where staff and community have little say over who gets rotated into their school. In one large urban school, virtually the entire staff was engaging in collaborative work by the end of the program's second year. Then, the principal retired and was replaced by someone with neither sympathy nor understanding for this work. Coaches and CFG members are watching an initiative into which they have poured time and energy begin to dissolve before their eyes. In another school, where the new administrative team perceived CFGs as an active threat to their authority, they have taken clear action to close down those teams, cutting out financial and logistical support for meetings and classroom observations and openly declaring that the existence of a CFG fragments the staff. Staff members have—or believe they have—no way to counter these assaults and have given up on the initiative.

• **School Culture**: When collegial work is consistent with the organization, structure, and manifest goals of the school, CFGs are readily absorbed into on-going work. At least two schools in the evaluation sample are fully and consciously committed to collaborative function. In such schools, faculty and administration perceived CFG work as a natural structure to encourage staff to look closely at their own practice; faculty reported that this work did not seem to be anything novel—but it did feel like an enriching expansion of what they had already done. Many schools in the group, however, are very much engaged in the traditional culture of schools, characterized by Dan Lortie (1975) by "presentism, conservatism, and individualism." In schools like these, work that is future-oriented, innovative, and collaborative runs in direct opposition to the established culture. Teachers involved with CFGs carry a constant burden of guilt about being "self-centered" enough to invest time in reflecting on practice and are readily de-railed from their collegial goals. In Cohort I, we funded a number of CFGs in schools where teacher independence and autonomy are reinforced, reasoning that teachers who wanted to improve their practice in such schools deserved as much help as staff in places that were making an affirmative effort to create a collaborative culture. We found, however, that, even with the strongest possible

coaches, the power of the school culture could not be overcome. In those schools, CFGs were marginalized, isolated, and, ultimately, deprived of necessary resources, however good the work felt to the individuals involved. It became clear early on that these "bunker CFGs" were not worth the investment.

• **Access to resources**: In the first year, Annenberg Institute staff compiled a set of protocols designed to help teachers look at student work and at one another's work in a variety of ways. Nearly all CFGs used these tools in various ways. While some groups used these protocols in ways not envisioned by the designers, simply having them on hand seemed to make it possible to begin the conversation about student work. The resources provided by NSRF were primarily procedural, however, since the program was deliberately constructed as what Sharon Rallis (personal communication, 1997) calls a "delivery system," lacking in specific content knowledge or conceptual recommendations. It was the assumption of the designers that the national school reform organizations with which the CFGs were affiliated—nine different groups[2] —would provide the content. This was not always the case, at least not in the coaches' understanding. Thus, those CFGs that had access to a body of information about school change or about developing new knowledge could get beyond their own knowledge base; those who could only draw upon the wisdom of the group had a relatively thin set of resources available to them. It also meant that groups that had constructed limiting definitions of what rigorous work meant had difficulty getting beyond those definitions. Thus, one CFG, with substantial access to external resources, explored complex models of meta-cognition for elementary students, while a group in a different school focused on ways to make graduation more memorable to eighth graders.

The Promise of Critical Friends Groups for Improving School Practice

This description of problems NSRF encountered in implementing CFG work should not suggest that collaborative cultures are not worth building. On the contrary, coaches and participants all over the country have said again and again that CFGs have provided them with the most powerful professional development experience they have ever encountered. Many individual teachers report that it has been a powerful influence on their classroom work. One, when asked about the effect of CFG work on her practice, said, "As a teacher, as a professional, I could...well, I don't know how many hours you have. I would say for me as a teacher, the most significant thing has been my work through the CFG and the impact that that's had on my classroom. And if I just look solely at a very narrow view of what is a teacher... then I would say, in terms of my own personal growth, that's been the major catalyst." An administrator who left this school for a year as Principal in Residence at the U.S. Department of Education concurred, saying:

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2 Coalition of Essential Schools, Carnegie Middle Schools, Co-NECT, Annenberg Challenge Schools, Southern Maine Partnership, ATLAS, League of Professional Schools, School Development Program, and The Galef Institute.

> Being away for a year and then coming back and seeing a lot of other schools, I believe that the level of conversation that's going on here is different and better than it was five years ago...just the language people are using, the things they are talking about... Critical Friends groups are institutionalized to an extent. They seem normal... [T]here's definitely a different kind of culture and climate and people were anxious and ready to get back into some of these kinds of conversations this year.

It is clear, however, that establishing CFGs is not a silver bullet. Hargreaves (1992) says that "at its best, contrived collegiality [his term for any kind of collaboration that is intentionally established] can be a useful preliminary phase in the move towards more enduring collaborative relationships between teachers." However, he warns, it will only lead in that direction if it is supported in serious and substantive ways by the administration. If it is treated as a "quick, slick administrative surrogate for more genuinely collaborative teacher cultures, [it] can no more guarantee a teaching community which works effectively, openly, and supportively together than the introduction of Esperanto can bring about world language unity"(p. 230).

If practitioners are to internalize the perceptions and behaviors required to create the changes demanded of them, they must learn how to do so in ways that are meaningful, self-directed, and tightly linked to their daily work. As Ann Lieberman says, we must embrace "a more expanded view of teacher development that encourages teachers to involve themselves as learners—in much the same way as they wish their students would" (Lieberman, 1995, p. 592). There is no way to do this "efficiently," defined as in a tidy, rapid fashion. None of the CFGs in the Cohort I sample began as mature groups; for virtually all of them, the kind of rooted growth that maintains itself began in the second year. Patience and continuity are required to make professional collaboration work.

The National School Reform Faculty program staff still has a great deal to learn about the conditions in which an external intervention can take root in a school and thrive. However, it appears to be an example of the "new paradigm" of professional development, depending as it does on practitioners behaving as managers of their own learning in a school context that is simultaneously familiar and open to the possibility of dynamic change. As we better understand how and under what circumstances such an approach actually enhances teacher practice and student learning, we will be able to create more effective models for doing so.

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